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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Politicizing Intelligence

We note some considerable irony in two stories now running in Washington: The FBI has rounded up five Indian Sikhs and charged them with plotting to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi when he visits the U.S. next month. And congressional committees want to investigate whether the CIA, as part of a counterterrorist program, once provided training for Lebanese who later took responsibility for a car bomb that killed 80 people.

The irony revolves around the issue of whether, in the violent world we live in today, you can combat terrorism at all, with methods civil or uncivil. Let's take the alleged plot to kill Rajiv Gandhi. He is prime minister of the world's most populous democracy, a nation that shows some signs, under his leadership, of greater warmth toward the U.S. and free-market capitalism after a long period of coolness bordering on hostility. His Russian neighbors have become increasingly nervous about his leanings. Pravda was practically hysterical in blaming all things Western and capitalist for the Bhopal disaster. India itself has suddenly experienced an outbreak of terrorist bombings. Mr. Gandhi of course inherited large problems with the Sikhs, but you can easily enough speculate that someone experienced in the fine art of destabilization has started to water and fertilize these discontents. The FBI arrests might be the tip of a very nasty-looking iceberg.

President Reagan, vigorously seconded by his secretary of state and every other top national security official, has asked all security agencies to mount whatever efforts they can to combat terrorism. That is hardly surprising. Pope John Paul II was shot. Indira Gandhi killed. Margaret Thatcher barely escaped a bomb, to name some of the more prominent targets. U.S. diplomats are in constant danger. Terrorists periodically blow up NATO's supply pipelines in Europe to prove that even military targets aren't secure.

There is and has been a pattern to all this. A Bulgarian government employee will go on trial in Rome this month for allegedly directing the attempt on the pope. The trigger man in

this attempt, Ali Agca, was trained in a PLO terrorist camp. The PLO now operates in Nicaragua, helping train Western Hemisphere terrorists. Terrorism experts keep uncovering new links between the world's leading and most vicious terrorist organizations. There's usually some Soviet connection in the background.

It seems obvious to us that good intelligence is vital to U.S. security and to U.S. efforts to preserve something approaching political stability in the democratic world. Yet the U.S. agency primarily responsible for that task, the CIA, remains under political attack in its own headquarters city.

Matters have improved some. At least Congress finally stopped the left-wing Covert Action Information Bulletin from blowing the cover of CIA agents. But a sensible and low-key little CIA effort to mine Nicaragua's Corinto harbor, so as to deny Communist bloc weapons to the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, was exposed and killed with much political breast-beating last year. Then the "training manual" scandal was unearthed just before last November's presidential election, to prove that CIA support for Nicaragua's anti-communists was "immoral."

The latest Washington Post disclosure, on Sunday's front page, said that the CIA, under orders from President Reagan, late last year tried to mount a counterterrorist operation in Lebanon in cooperation with Lebanese security agents. The effort was in response to the terrorist bombing in October 1983 that killed 241 American servicemen and a similar attack last September on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. The Post claimed that one of the units the CIA helped train was responsible for a car bomb attempt directed at Hussein Fadlallah, believed to be the leader of the Shiite fanatics responsible for the attacks on Americans. He escaped, but the bomb killed 80 people and wounded some 200 others. The Post said the CIA had opposed car bombing because of danger to bystanders and had severed its connections with the bombers four months before the attempt on Fadlallah.

lah. The CIA said it never conducted training "related to" the car bombing event.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, implying that Republicans aren't to be trusted, wants a separate inquiry by Senate intelligence committee Democrats into CIA doings. But Sen. Sam Nunn, another Democrat member, seems to have quietly disassociated himself from that effort. We sense that more and more politicians are becoming nervous over the constant political thrashings about real and imagined CIA misdeeds. Not everyone you meet in the intelligence business will be a saint, but we need all the intelligence we can get when no leader of a democratic country or institution is secure.